

Editorial . . .

The year 1966 is widely accepted as the two-hundredth anniversary of the beginning of Methodism in America. This issue of *The Asbury Seminary* takes cognizance of this event. The editorial board laid plans for this special commemorative issue more than a year ago. In planning the number, we have sought to keep in perspective the past, the present, and a little of the future. The interest of our readers is more than antiquarian and yet the past is instructive both for the present and for the future. We have asked our contributors, therefore, to draw heavily upon the past in order that we may better evaluate the present and anticipate the future.

Methodism was a relative latecomer to the shores of colonial America. Methodism as a movement was emerging from the parent Church of England about the same time the English colonies were emerging to a status of independence from mother England. Perhaps because of its late start and the well-entrenched denominational groups that it found upon arrival, Methodism has never been at its strongest along the Atlantic coast. It was in the interior beyond the Appalachian mountains that Methodism won its most spectacular successes and acquired its distinctive new world character. There it was in competition with enthusiastic Presbyterians and Baptists. As historians often noted, Methodism brought to the American frontier an aristocratic church polity but a democratic gospel. The Presbyterians and Baptists on the other hand, both representing the Reformed tradition, brought an aristocratic gospel but a democratic polity. The pioneers appreciated the autonomy of the local churches which the Baptists advocated. The frontiersman also appreciated the gospel of the Methodist circuit riders which featured "free salvation for all men and full salvation for the whole man." For centuries the prevailing trend, especially in Protestantism, had featured a limited atonement and salvation only for the elect. When the Methodists and those who were influenced by them came preaching that "whosoever will may come and take of the water of life freely," it seemed like an entirely new gospel to the frontiersman. American Methodism eventually came to number far more adherents than the parent body in the British Isles. American Methodism successfully survived John Wesley's strictures against the American revolution and bravely set its sails to the new winds of indepen-

dence. It also survived for the most part demands for freedom from ecclesiastical control.

Today, two hundred years later, it is probably the most influential Christian group in the United States. Methodism has shown more involvement in community life than most other groups. In the halls of Congress, for example, Methodism claims more adherents than any other denomination. Methodists have always been leaders in both evangelism and in social reform. In keeping with its founder's vision, Methodism has had as its distinctive role, in the words of one of the early conferences, "to reform the nation and to spread scriptural holiness." Methodism's prominent role during the nineteenth century in such reform movements as temperance is well known. In the twentieth century the denomination has been in the forefront of those seeking social justice and righteousness in national issues. Today Methodism is among the most articulate and influential forces in the modern ecumenical movement.

There has been through the decades a continuing debate as to wherein lies the mainstream of historical Methodism. Most would argue that it lies in the denomination resulting from the merging of the Methodist Episcopal Church, North and South, together with the Methodist Protestant Church. Others would insist that the central concerns of historic Methodism are better continued in smaller denominations that broke off from the parent body with a view of conserving this heritage. In any case, Methodism is determined not to become irrelevant but rather involved in the decades immediately ahead.

In the symposium entitled "Issues in Contemporary Methodism," a panel of distinguished Methodists have been called upon to share their insights in this area. Anniversaries provide a good time to take inventory and to plot the future. Our editorial board appreciates the ready response from those whose evaluations we have requested. It is to be expected that their insights will present perspective and promote discussion among our readers.

Practically every leader in American Methodism is concerned with the matter of "renewal." Asbury Theological Seminary is also interested in renewal. Indeed, it was a concern for renewal that brought this institution into existence and contributed to its significant growth during the past four decades. With every signal church renewal, whether in sixteenth century Europe, eighteenth century England, or elsewhere, there has been a deep involvement in the past, together with a perception of spiritual verities and an alertness to present needs and issues. Only when there is this combination of rooting in the past and a creative response to contemporary issues can there be true and lasting renewal. If this issue can contribute even in a modest way to this, the editors will be grateful.